

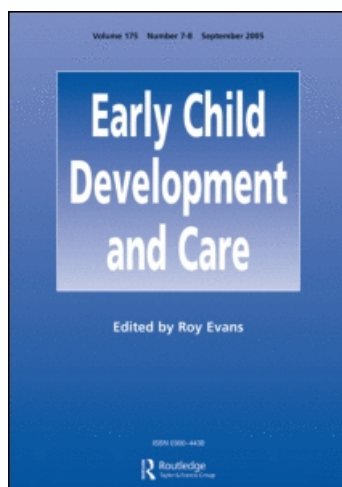
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### Supporting men as fathers, caregivers, and educators

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# Supporting men as fathers, caregivers, and educators

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A review of research on fathering and research on men employed in work with young children in centers and in elementary schools emphasises the importance of positive male engagement with young children for their optimal development. Research also reveals the complexity of studying these relationships and the barriers in families and in society that impede the implementation of positive interactions. Suggestions are given for increasing positive male participation in the home and in educational settings.

**Keywords:** *Male childcare providers; Male educators; Father involvement*

For decades, research on men's influence on children focused on concerns for worrisome educational and socio-emotional effects of father absence, particularly in families living in poverty (Biller, 1970). Fatherless children are five times more likely to live in poverty than children living with both parents. 'Violent criminals are overwhelmingly males who grew up without fathers—60% of America's rapists, 72% of adolescent murderers, and 70% of long-term prison inmates' (Bradley, 1998, p. D3). Children in father-absent families are reported to have lower educational achievements, more aggression, and less self-regulation.

In earlier centuries:

Fathers were viewed as all-powerful patriarchs who wielded enormous power over their families. Fathers were primarily responsible for ensuring that their children grew up with an appropriate sense of values, acquired primarily from a study of the Bible ... Around the time of industrialization, however, primary focus shifted from moral leadership to bread-winning and economic support of the family. Then, perhaps as a result of the Great

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Depression, which revealed many men as poor providers, social scientists came to portray fathers as sex-role models .... In contrast to earlier conceptualizations of fathers' roles, researchers, theorists, and practitioners ... recognize that fathers play a number of significant roles—companions, care provider's spouses, protectors, models, moral guides, teachers, breadwinners—whose relative importance varies across historical epochs and subcultural groups. (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004, pp. 3–4)

Textbooks on child development until recently have not given much space to father–child relationships over time and as a function of often complex modern family relationships and childcare settings. One recent popular text, for example, devotes just a couple of pages—only to father involvement in childbirth, adjustment following the birth of a baby, and the option of paternity leave!

Yet recent decades have seen an explosive growth and interest in many nations in father/child research (Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 2002). Studies have delved more deeply and also more broadly into the whole gamut of male interactions with infants and children across many societies, and focused on paternal influences in relation to a wide range of outcomes, including peer relationships and even children's ability when grown to adulthood to bond affectionately with their own infants (Lamb, 2004).

Researchers into men's impact on children's lives have a difficult job! Men are now interacting with children not only as biological parents in the home, but also as divorced dads living apart from their children's residence. Men are interacting with children in a variety of other relationships—as stepfathers, grandfathers, foster fathers, and partners with women who already have children. Some fathers live with biological *and* with stepchildren. Some men work with children in educational institutions, such as childcare and elementary grades. Some work in special settings for children with disabilities. Some fathers are violent toward their children and also live in violent neighborhoods, while others try to shield their children from the violence in their environment and on the television (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 2006).

Researchers have been particularly eager to emphasize the need to focus on *positive* paternal involvement (Palkovitz, 2002). But how shall positive paternal involvement be defined? Pleck (1997) has urged that father involvement be conceptualised with emphasis on positive paternal involvement, defined as 'high engagement, accessibility and responsibility ... not just "going through the motions" of fatherhood' (p. 102). Study of men's involvement with their children should emphasise their 'positive, wide-ranging, and active participation in their children's lives' (Marsiglio *et al.*, 2000, p. 276).

McKeown *et al.* (1998) explain that authoritative fathering 'which involves providing consistent values and boundaries and relating to the child with warmth and confidence, is beneficial to the child, but "authoritarian" fathering, which involves excessive discipline, control, and aloofness from the child, is not' (p. 87).

Fathers, who remembered that their own fathers had been high in expressing anger and low in expressing love, themselves had children who were rated as more aggressive and hyperactive in kindergarten (Cowan *et al.*, 1996).

*Case studies and qualitative research findings* often are helpful in furthering understanding of *positive paternal involvement*. As Piburn (2006) has noted 'Perhaps the

clearest evidence of global change lies less in evolving workforce statistics, and more in the numbers of men in public with infants strapped to their chests, pushing strollers on the street, and at the diaper changing tables inside men's restrooms at restaurants, malls, and airports' (p. 18).

One of the winning entries written for a Father's Day contest in which wives nominated the 'Best Dad Ever' provides a poignant example of how rich case studies can be for understanding fathering behaviors:

In our world, a normal dad golfs, watches sports, goes four-wheeling with buddies, and works late. My husband, Michael, does none of these things. He says our children are his life. He is truly an angel among dads. I have never seen a father who is as gentle as he is. He has never raised his voice or his hand to them. His childhood was filled with hitting, yelling, and throwing, and he is determined that his children never know violence. I suffer from depression, severe sometimes; my husband just picks up the slack—without complaining. He sleeps in our baby's room and takes care of her all night so I can sleep. Then he goes to work early so he can come home early and help me with our kids. His work is stressful. He is a religious educator for high school students; some of whom are special needs kids. He never brings his work home or complains. Our children have emulated his unfailing optimism and hardworking nature. His favorite pastime truly is playing with the kids and reading to them. All you have to do is look at our children to know what kind of father he is. They are the most respectful and helpful children I have even known. For these and many other reasons, I believe he is the best dad in the world. (Phelps, 2008, p. 86)

*Amount of time spent* often was used as a measure of father involvement. But this may not be a good predictive measure for positive child outcomes. Indeed, researchers no longer focus just on amount of time a father is available to a child!

Simply being there is not enough; being available and involved is what really counts .... kids whose fathers are cold and authoritarian, derogatory and intrusive have the hardest time with grades and social relationships. They are even worse off than kids who live in homes with no father at all. Kids with non-supportive dads and dads who humiliate them were the ones .... most likely to be headed for trouble. They were the ones who displayed aggressive behavior toward their friends, they were the ones who had trouble in school, and they were the ones with problems often linked to delinquency and youth violence. (Parke & Brott, 1999, pp. 9–10)

### **Further variables to consider in studying fathering**

Subtle variables need to be considered in inquiring into paternal styles and child outcomes.

#### *Age when paternity begins*

Children of *teen fathers* may be at greater risk not only for psychological outcomes but for physical risks, such as 'shaken baby syndrome,' in comparison with infants born to mature parents. Some fathers in new marriages have started second families at a much later age. Paternal late childrearing may be very different from earlier patterns. There are risks and benefits for late childrearing. Paternal age over 40 is associated

medically with higher risk of fathering children with rare mutations and more complex disorders, such as autism or schizophrenia (Saey, 2008). Paternal age may have a vital influence on patterns of interactions for a number of reasons, including more paternal *reflectiveness* about having played a distant or negligible role as a parent with children from a first marriage and a resolution to be a more engaged and sensitive father in the new family.

#### *Father interactions when alone with child or with mother present*

In a Swedish study, fathers were more likely to display affectionate behavior and engage in more play with their 8–12-month-old infants when alone with their babies and mothers were not present (Hwang, 1986). Studies of fathers need to take note of such possible differences when observing the quality of paternal interactions.

#### *Intergenerational changes in fathering*

The Internet and television have increased the possibility for dissemination of new ideas and versions of family life across the world. Despite the slowness with which particular cultural taboos or mores change in some cultures, increased global access to the Web could enhance the possibility of more intergenerational changes in paternal parenting styles in some societies.

Electronic information sharing across the globe supports the importance of conducting ongoing *longitudinal* research. For example, in traditional Korean culture, fathers were far more involved with sons than with daughters. Parental roles reflected the Confucian classic rule ‘a stern male and a nurturant female’ (Yi, 1993, p. 19). Yi explains that the household was divided into two sectors, and men and women were rigidly separated. The husband was referred to as *bagatyangban*, the person who is exterior, and the wife was referred to as *anae*, the person who is interior. After age 5, boys moved to the men’s quarters, and their mothers taught girls domestic responsibilities. No contact or communication was permitted between males and females, even for seven-year-old children. Modern Korean culture has shifted from this gender-rigid patterning of parenting roles and responsibilities. In intergenerational interviews with Korean male family adults, regarding how they handle developmentally normative behaviors and how they discipline young children, fathers reported more flexible and empathic involvement with both male and female children compared with responses of their own fathers (the children’s grandfathers) about how they had interacted with their preschool children (Jung & Honig, 2001).

*Cross-cultural researches* are very important in adding to knowledge of men’s interactions with children. Father involvement with infants and young children varies markedly across culture groups. Cross-cultural data on paternal investment indicates that ‘father involvement is lowest in African cultures, while it is highest in Southeast Asian and Pacific Island Cultures’ (Hewlitt, 2004, p. 187).

One vivid example of the importance of gathering cross-cultural data is that rough and tumble play was considered important as a fathering technique in recent research

in the USA. But inquiry into father interactions with very young children in other cultures has found that this is not a way that fathers interact with their young children at all in some societies. Aka hunter-gatherers in the African Republic are gentle, highly engaged, and physically nurturing with their children. Hewlitt (2004) reports that:

... because Aka fathers knew their infants so well, they did not have to use vigorous play to initiate communication or interactions ... [and they] show their love in other ways ... Aka fathers knew how to read and understand their infants' verbal and nonverbal communication. (p. 189)

### *Social class*

Not only culture, but also *social class* is an important variable in studying men's patterns of interaction with infants and young children. Replies from African-American fathers from different social classes as to how they responded to child requests and to developmentally normative or unapproved behaviors of their preschoolers, revealed that middle class African-American fathers' patterns of responses with both male and female preschoolers were quite similar to those of White middle class respondents, but differed in some domains from responses provided by low-education African-American fathers who were living in poverty (Honig & Mayne, 1982).

### *Education as a powerful contributor to positive parenting*

Findings from the sixth National Survey of Family Growth in the USA reported that education was a key factor in fatherhood and the main predictor of a father's positive involvement with his children. Fathers who had been to college, in comparison with fathers who had a high school diploma or less, were more likely to eat meals with or feed children under five every day (78.6% vs. 70.3%). They were more likely to bathe, diaper, and dress small children (66.4% vs. 43.6%). They were more likely to play with children every day (87.1% vs. 75.8%). Of particular importance for children's readiness for school, highly educated fathers were more likely to read to children each day (32% vs. 9.5%) ([www.cdc.gov/nchs/dataa/series/sr\\_23/sr\\_026.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/dataa/series/sr_23/sr_026.pdf)).

### *Effects of father's attachment history in his family of origin*

Attachment of infants to mothers has been intensively studied for over half a century since Bowlby's pioneer observations in England and Ainsworth's establishment in Baltimore of the Strange Situation as the predominant technique for assessing infant attachment to a caregiver. 'Secure attachment' is defined as a strong emotional bond between a baby or young child and a nurturing, tuned-in caregiver. Secure attachment develops through the infant's experiences and interactions during the first year with key adult caregivers. Attachment representations, whether secure or insecure, become internalized working models. They are 'templates that serve as guides for interpreting emotions, perceptions, and behaviors in all future relationships' (Honig, 2002, p. 4).

Intergenerational transmission of security of attachment has been confirmed in longitudinal researches in several societies. The impact of the quality of emotional relationships with parents that a father has had in his own family of origin *does* impact on the quality of attachment that develops between his baby and himself. Infants at one year tend to have less secure relationships with fathers who report poor emotional relations in childhood with their own parents (Steele *et al.*, 1996). The dads were interviewed *prior* to the birth of the baby. Thus, a positive advance in our knowledge of men's involvement with the children they care for is that attachment research now actively focuses on the *attachment of infants to fathers* as well as to mothers.

Fathers who perceive their own importance in their infants' development, who show delight in, as well as sensitivity to the needs of their babies at three months, and who consider it very important to spend time with their babies are more likely to have one-year-olds who are securely attached to them (Cox *et al.*, 1992).

### *Gender unease between men and women*

Some of the perplexity about how to involve more fathers in intimate nurturing interactions with their children or how to increase the recruitment of males into nursery work rests on discomforts that each gender has with what are perceived as the work 'domains' of the other. Caring for infants and young children has been traditionally perceived as 'women's work'—an idea still deeply regarded as a truism in many culture groups in the world.

This gender discomfort is vividly expressed by Ian, a trained male nursery teacher in Great Britain, as he muses about how working class fathers actually feel and perceive his nursery classroom:

When they come in and it's all nice pink pastel colours and flowers and women are walking around everywhere, middle class women, the children, all 26 children are screaming, and they're all painting and paint brushes everywhere ... I got to think that this guy has worked 20 years in shipyard, he's just become unemployed. I know his child's on free dinners. What is in it for him at the center? In that situation there is nothing ... he's gonna feel threatened you know. There's nothing for him when he does come. He's not gonna feel comfortable. So I can see why people do sport and digging and school trips. It's a great way for blokes to get involved and to feel comfortable. But we've also got to work on building up the relationship with the parents and the fathers so that you can make that next step and get involved with actual education, the care of the child, and develop that partnership thing. (Warin, 2006, p. 527)

Ian developed a variety of musical strategies to involve fathers—including a Father's Band, and an all-male singing group. He revealed that in the singing group, dads could comment about some of the *pleasures of fathering*, which they would not be able to risk talking about at other male social settings, such as watching football or at the work place. Ian explained:

How often do men get a chance to go somewhere in a group and say 'my children are quite wonderful actually' and *say* that to someone, 'cause you don't do it at the pub ... When else do you get a chance to say actually 'I'm dead chuffed my son's gone to the toilet for the first time by himself? (Warin, 2006, p. 528)



*Working parents*

Dual- and single-earner families present special challenges in devising strategies for studying and encouraging paternal involvement with children. Work choices by parents affect child–father intimate relationships. A higher proportion of insecure attachments between sons and fathers (but not daughters) has been reported in dual-earner, compared with single-earner families (Chase-Lansdale & Owen, 1987; Belsky & Rovine, 1988).

Grych and Clark (1999) note that although greater father participation in caregiving is associated with enhanced cognitive and social development in children, participation that is *required*, as in dual-career families, may not have as sanguine results. They speculate that in dual-earner households, some fathers do not feel they have much control over the obligation to be responsible for more daily childcare tasks before they feel ready or able to do so. Thus, they experience greater stress and frustration that leads to less sensitive or responsive parenting. Of interest in this study is that at 12 months, fathers exhibited significantly more positive effect and behaviors with their female infants than with sons. Fathers with non-employed wives showed higher levels of involvement with greater expressed positive affect, sensitivity, and responsiveness compared with fathers whose wives worked more than 25 hours per week. When mothers were not employed or employed part time, then fathers also expressed higher levels of marital satisfaction when the babies were four months old and later, at one year of age. *Marital satisfaction* is another variable that must be assessed when studying differential paternal interactions with young children.

*Fathers' gender role ideology*

In a study of preschoolers' parents' views on male role norms and parental roles, the more time that fathers spent as the child's primary caregiver, the more likely were the fathers to report more liberal views of the father's role. 'Active participation in childcare appears to reinforce fathers' belief that they are as well-suited and as important for childcare as their wives' (Bonney *et al.*, 1999, p. 411). Further, men performed more childcare tasks among couples where there was *high marital satisfaction*. One pathway toward increasing father involvement might lie in *offering counseling to families to resolve marital issues* where high intensity conflicts serve as a major deterrent to fathers' positive engagement with and care for their young children.

*Effects of parental job loss*

Financial uncertainties attendant upon job loss, as well as increased paternal worries, provoke stresses and strains in father–child relationships. During the Great Depression in the USA, relations between fathers and children were affected by the frustrations and discouragements of fathers who had previously been breadwinners for the family (Elder, 1974). Youths (children born in 1920–21) suffered negative education, achievement, and health effects into adulthood. In this sample from working-class



families, female children who were physically attractive seemed buffered from paternal negative interactions.

### *Perceived gender differences in power*

'Power is the ability to influence others, to be listened to, to get your way rather than having to do what others want' (Tannen, 2001, p. 317). Men have historically been perceived as more powerful than women.

Head Start providers, interviewed in the Beach Center study, frequently raised the issue of differential power relationships between men and women (Turbiville *et al.*, 2000). Based on their own personal experiences of domestic violence, some of the women care providers felt anger over the physical presence of fathers, despite training programs to increase gender sensitivity. When interviewed for this study, the fathers themselves expressed eager interest in employment training opportunities or classroom work with the children when compared with fathers in other studies.

Because of power differentials, some theoreticians (Kelly, 1998) see men's more extensive engagement in childcare as problematic and even of possible concern unless:

That engagement is set in a wider context of men's anti-oppressive practice. This involves men challenging dominant relations of power in the family, welfare services, and society more generally. If such a broader practice is not implemented, then men's greater engagement in childcare by itself may simply result in replication of oppressive power relations in one form or another: annexation or colonization of initiatives development by/for women; diversion of resources away from other initiatives promoting the well-being of women and/or children; perhaps even abuse of women and/or children (p. 174).

Concerns such as these must be addressed as well as giving due attention to the concerns of male workers who express feeling 'marginalized' working in a world of mostly female care providers.

### **What further data are needed to promote paternal involvement?**

Disentangling specific paternal or male influences on child development outcomes requires in-depth and specific information both quantitative *and* qualitative. Interviewing males about the number of hours they spend in different childcare domains, such as physical childcare (bathing, diapering, or feeding), play, discipline, or administrative tasks with children (arranging for dentist visits or play dates) may not capture the *quality* of the child's relationship with the parent.

One preschooler told me that when her mommy is at work and her daddy takes care of her, he sits in the living room and watches TV and locks her in the bedroom and does not seem to hear her even when she calls out that she needs to go to the toilet! Yet that time might be counted as 'number of father hours spent with child without mother present.' Another child reported happily that her daddy (Mom's new boyfriend) pushes her on the swing in a local park. Research that only focuses on the relationship and activities of biological dads with children would not capture the

relationship (short-lived as it turned out to be) of this preschooler with a positive non-biologically related male adult role model.

### *Father absence*

Absence of the biological father in the home does not always mean that a child has no father figure. Thus, research will need to inquire about the role of a grandpa, an uncle, or other long-term male role models in the child's life. It is of note that fatherless families continue to be the focus for researchers, since desertion, divorce, and the choice for single parenthood result in children living without male role models in many families (Furstenberg *et al.*, 1987). Researchers studying fatherless children over the past decades have reported worrisome effects, such as violence in male children, worsening school behaviors, difficulties with peers, and poor life choices (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1998). Effects of father loss through desertion have been noted to be more deleterious than loss of father due to death (Maier & Lachman, 2000). A child experiencing parental divorce may have lived through extreme hostility and fighting *prior* to the parents' separation. Lamb (2002) has cogently pointed out that father absence may affect children for a *multitude* of reasons. Without a father in the home, a child may not only lack a male model or disciplinarian, but also be living in economically poorer circumstances, with a stressed mother who needs to work more outside the home and thus cannot provide adequate guidance and supervision. The mother may be preoccupied with bitterness and grief and be unable to provide the nurturing comfort the child needs to cope with the rupture in family relationships.

Head Start, the most widely known federal program for families of preschool children living in poverty in the USA, mandates parent involvement. Yet less than half of Head Start children live with both mother and father. Data from Head Start confirm that when fathers were indeed more involved, *whether they lived in the home or not*, then the children exhibited more positive behaviors, had fewer behavior problems, less aggression and less hyperactivity (Administration for Children and Families, 2006, p. 9).

### *Techniques differ for data collection on father involvement*

*Interviews* are an excellent technique for gathering data on parent-child relationships. Yet, fathering researches often use *mothers as informants* if the father is unavailable for direct requests for interviews. A mother, who has intense resentment for the biological father for abandoning the family, sometimes even prior to the baby's birth, may give a distorted picture of the biological father's attempts to see or interact with the child.

Distortion of maternal information provided may not be related to social class at all. In a personal case, as a licensed psychologist, I testified in court in favor of equal time with the children for a dad whom I had observed in my office as sensitive, gentle and responsively attuned in interactions with his young children. Yet the mother wanted the court to forbid the father from seeing the children for at least six years. As

a successful professional herself, she told me that she perceived the father as a 'weakling' and wanted him deprived of all parental visitation rights. Using only maternal reports sometimes may not provide as reliable information on fathers' positive emotional investment and skills with his young children.

Mothers, however, may well be critical in assisting researchers to access fathers for interviews and observations. The Early Head Start (EHS) Father Studies relied heavily on mothers for enlisting resident and non-resident biological and non-biological fathers into their national study of low-income fathers. With the inauguration of EHS, serving children younger than three years in the USA, these studies were launched to examine fathering behaviors in the low-income families whose infants and toddlers were being served in EHS programs across the USA. These studies began in 1997 and were designed to complement the EHS Research and Evaluation Project, which involved random assignment of 30,001 families receiving EHS services. Results were reported in a series of articles published in the journal *Parenting: Science and Practice*, April–September, 2006. In one of the studies, low-income fathers were asked:

- (1) 'What does being a 'good father' mean to you?' (2) 'How has becoming a father impacted your life?' (3) 'Talk about your experiences with your own father.' (4) 'What kinds of help or support do you get to do your job as a father?' (5) 'What gets in the way of being a father?' (6) 'What are you proudest of about your child?' (Summers *et al.*, 2006, p. 148)

Fathers saw themselves as a source of stability (being there for the children), providing support, as a mentor and teacher, guiding, shaping values, teaching children, and serving as a good example of someone to look up to. It should be emphasised that these fathers were accessed through the mothers and therefore had either neutral or positive relationships with the mothers. Many of these men described their own fathers as having been emotionally distant, too busy, or unable to express feelings.

The EHS fathers' positive responses remind us that counselors working with dads, who never experienced good relationships with fathers in their own families of origin, can help their male clients to heal from years of yearning by supporting them in becoming the kind of father to their own little ones that they themselves wished they had had in early childhood.

Another research project in this EHS publication teased out negative and positive clusters of parent behaviors. Cluster analysis was carried out on videotaped father–infant interactions coded at 24 and 36 months (Ryan *et al.*, 2006). Fathers who exhibited behaviors in the negative cluster were more intrusive than they were stimulating or sensitive. Toddlers with highly supportive parents had higher Bayley Mental Development Index (MDI) scores than children in the non-supportive cluster groups. By 36 months, children of highly supportive fathers scored significantly higher by 10.3 points on the MDI compared with children of high-negative fathers. The researchers concluded that children of two supportive (rather than detached, negative, or intrusive) parents scored higher than children with only one. Positive father behaviors, not only those of mothers, contributed toward 36-month higher child cognitive outcomes.

Of interest among the findings of the researchers for the National Survey of EHS Fathers is the indication that *two distinct styles of father involvement* appear to be emerging. Programs seem either to emphasize *parenting* or they emphasize men's *personal development* with themes based on provision of training, education, literacy, support, and sports (Raikes & Bellotti, 2006, p. 240). It will certainly be of interest to see whether one or another of these program styles results in more positive outcomes for children. Despite national funding and vigorous efforts, the studies found 'that it is not easy to productively engage fathers; and social programs aimed at supporting families may need to consider additional strategies to make programs more attractive to and supportive of fathers' (Boller *et al.*, 2006, p. 137).

Other in-depth interview studies with low-income African-American fathers have provided richly nuanced data (Nelson *et al.*, 2002). Fathers mentioned that the mothers of their children refused to let them have access to the children, often citing drug dealing, incarceration history, alcoholism, and failure to provide funds for needed items, such as crib or diapers. Many of these fathers did credit their children with motivating them to move from criminal to more mainstream employment and 'to leave their fast and dangerous street lives for more conventional ones' (Nelson *et al.*, 2002, p. 551). The researchers conclude:

In short, children did a lot for fathers. However, fathers sometimes did very little for their children in return, particularly as these children aged. Oftentimes, fathers described bleak scenarios in which they were barred from fulfilling the fathering role because of their economic marginality and personal problems (drug addiction, for example). Fathers sometimes said that when they could not contribute, they felt too guilty to have ongoing contact with their children. (p. 551)

### *Differences in maternal and paternal perceptions of father roles and contributions*

Researchers need to take into account the possibility that mothers may perceive paternal involvement quite differently from fathers and either actively support or try to prevent it. Research on *differences* in maternal and paternal perceptions are of interest, since increased disparity of perceptions about degree of spousal involvement in childcare activities can lead to more marital friction and thus subsequently to more child distress. Honig and Matsushita (in preparation) found that mothers reported lower satisfaction with paternal degree of involvement in comparison with fathers' satisfaction with mothers' involvement in childcare activities, in varied domains such as play, physical caregiving, administrative planning for child's appointments, reading/teaching and emotional/social interactions.

### *Observations in the home*

In-home observation is a costly and time-consuming method to gather data on paternal involvement. In addition, what has been labeled with moms as the 'girdle on' effect may prevent the investigator from gaining a valid in-home picture of family dynamics. A parent may be on best behavior when a 'stranger' enters the home. One

mom in her counseling session confided that her husband was easily angered and used many curse words while disciplining the children. The Home Visitor to this family, however, had not heard the father using strings of angry curse words or seen him get physically violent with his son in her presence. She was puzzled about the mother's complaint that the child had a 'foul mouth' at home. Yet the school principal was complaining to the mother about the child's inappropriate use of curse words and impulsive physical attack on a peer who had teased him out on the playground. The father had been brought up to be strictly obedient to his parents. He wanted the same behaviors from his own children. He considered therapeutically positive suggestions such as using 'I statements' instead of 'You accusatory statements' as just 'psychobabble.' He informed the Home Visitor that it was too hard for him to change; he just wanted the *child* to shape up! Long-term building of trust between outreach workers with families and increased training and skill building for work with parents are important considerations. A Home Visitor needs a large repertoire of techniques to work with parents as well as with a child, if the goal is to promote positive child behavior changes over time (Honig, 1979, 1996).

Since many paternal interactions occur when the father comes home from work, *observational* data on male interactions may be hard to come by. One ingenious researcher confirmed how strong a linguistic influence a loving father can have (and how powerful babies are as language learners) by putting a microphone for a week in the crib of a baby whose papa spoke Spanish with him for a while each day on returning home from work. This time-sampling technique permitted documentation of how much receptive language in Spanish the baby had indeed acquired by one year from his father's daily conversational ritual (Friedlander *et al.*, 1972).

### **Increasing male involvement in researches and in children's lives**

Males can be crucial as attachment figures and teachers for young children. However, *recruiting techniques* require creativity and ingenuity to enlist men into participation in early childhood settings or into research projects on fathering. By sitting for hours in free clinics for pregnant women in low-income neighborhoods, researchers were able to persuade unwed teens to enlist their male partners (who would become first-time fathers) into a program to teach young men in small groups, over several sessions, about infant and child development (Pfannenstiel & Honig, 1995). Half of the men were randomly assigned to a control group that was offered the program later on. Fathers were videotaped with their infants after the birth of the baby. The women were eager to help recruit fathers-to-be. Many expressed that this would be a way to keep the men involved in their lives. Clinical insights from this work were illuminating. Even when assigned randomly to the program group, some young men were dissuaded from participating because they were already intimate with a new partner and did not want anything to do with the baby soon to be born to the former girlfriend. Some of the fathers were talked into dropping out of the program by men in their workplace. Their buddies at work ridiculed the idea of the program by assuring the fathers that 'learning about babies is for girls and not for men!'

Recruiting *volunteers from high school and college classes* could increase the participation of men in ECE settings. This would serve to enhance and enrich the experiences both of young children and the young men who will be fathers someday.

Torelli (2008) urges that early administrators 'actively seek out men as caregivers and teachers. If you are not able to find fully qualified men, you should hire males as assistants and support their professional development so they can eventually become teachers ... Do you have a male cook or bus driver for your program? Invite them in the classroom' (p. 4).

Cunningham (1998) notes that the challenge is:

How to *sell* men on the idea of volunteering. The question to think through is one of *What would a man get out of volunteering?* Or, if you are contacting an institution, *How would a high school or college benefit from having a male student volunteer with young children?* (p. 21)

As a consultant for a childcare center, I was once asked what could be done for an infant who had been crying and upset for over a month since enrollment despite staff efforts at comforting the child. The family was from China. I asked a Mandarin-speaking young man enrolled in one of our Child Development classes to go and volunteer in the center to hold the baby and talk to her in Mandarin for a few hours a few times a week. His loving reassuring words in Mandarin while tenderly holding her in his arms helped the baby become calmer and she was able to adjust to the center without further distress. Brainstorming how to provide *internship course credits for males* to work in ECE settings is important in order to increase male volunteer participation in childcare. Tables and booths staffed by current center volunteers, or by males enrolled in ECE courses, can be set up at high school and college events such as beginning semester Open House gatherings, or during school festivals or job fairs.

Senior Citizens centers are a good place to recruit retired grandfathers who could volunteer a few hours each week to spend with a preschooler in a center, particularly if transportation can be provided. Grandfathers spending intimate quality time one-on-one with a young child might be particularly felicitous for a child with no male role models in the family.

#### *Ask fathers to help in projects requiring carpenter or building skills*

To ensure that programming to increase positive father involvement is successful, it is important to ask fathers to explain their interests, wishes, priorities, and program offerings they would really like to attend. Enlisting dads' help in school painting or repair projects is another way to make fathers feel useful and in a more comfortable role in the center. One childcare facility was cited by the licensing agency for a broken slide outdoors. The children were then forbidden to play outdoors, and there were no funds to hire someone to take down that large piece of equipment. Several of the fathers found it an enjoyable cooperative activity to take down the large slide. They also felt satisfaction that the children could now once again use the outdoor space, even though that particular piece of play equipment was no longer available, until funds could be raised for a replacement.



*Express appreciation for father participation*

Fathers are only human in enjoying when they are asked courteously for help. 'Please' and 'Thank you' are important words for preschoolers to learn! Expressing genuine appreciation when fathers pitch in and provide services is a positive gesture that may lead to more paternal involvement in other classroom activities. A father might volunteer to come in and play guitar for a singing circle session. At the Children's Center in Syracuse, the teachers needed a solid wooden top for the ring stack set. They wanted to see whether toddlers would notice and reject that piece as not having the hole, which the other pieces had, and which is necessary if a piece is to fit over the ring stack pole. A father kindly volunteered to make a wooden plug. He sanded and smoothed the piece in his shop at home. The caregivers wrote him a special 'Thank you' note explaining about Piagetian spatial learning and how helpful he had been to contribute to making the toy more useful for their teaching work with the toddlers.

*Ask already involved fathers for their ideas*

Involved fathers can be enlisted to suggest ways to involve disengaged fathers. Brainstorm with small groups of involved fathers and elicit the creative suggestions they generate in order to 'lure' non-involved fathers into new activities, such as daily reading with their preschoolers, or participation in the centers their young children attend. One Head Start father (Rice, 2008), now on the Parent Advisory Board of the program where his child is enrolled, smiled as he recounted that he first became involved when his child's preschool program had a Poker Night just for dads! He also explained that he became ever more comfortable and involved as he came to know more of the fathers of his children's playmates in the center.

Other fathers, who work long hours away from home, report that they much prefer planned activities that *include* their wives and children, rather than activities that are exclusively men's programs. Fathers have different needs. Programs need to ask fathers for their ideas and craft a variety of program plans to increase father participation in the child's school world. When asked, fathers may of course suggest ideas quite different from those of mothers. In one EHS Center, the fathers designed a pizza party and also designed gift cards to be sent out to deserving fathers participating in program. The mothers, however, elected to dress up and go together for a night out at a restaurant. Berger (1998) offers more suggestions to involve fathers in early childhood programs:

- Promote partnerships between fathers. Match up new dads with current participants and form peer support groups.
- Provide fathers with information on child development. Teach them techniques for teaching sons *and* daughters of all ages.
- Make it easy for fathers to attend. Have flexible schedules. Provide or pay for transportation, and offer childcare.
- Offer life skills training. Teach classes on parenting relationships, anger management, and leadership.

- Help identify the abilities and needs of fathers. Provide literacy, job training, and employment opportunities, information, and referrals.
- Have men in leadership roles of the program.
- Promote tolerance. Encourage cultural diversity and acknowledge the important roles of mothers.
- Teach standards and accountability for fatherhood. Let dads know there are rights, responsibilities, resources and rewards ('four Rs of Fatherhood') to being a good father.
- Listen and learn from fathers. Survey men for their ideas and interests, and let them know you value their opinions.
- Recognize all kinds of fathers—from teen dads, to men who serve as father figures, to incarcerated fathers; remember that all dads need support (p. 60). Nowadays, videos are available for staff training to increase paternal involvement.

The 2007 *KidSafety of America* catalog, for example, lists videos with titles such as: 'Getting Men Involved in Childcare, Education, and Social work'; 'Young Men as Fathers' (available also in Spanish); and 'Developing and Maintaining a Young Fatherhood program' ([www.kidsafetystore.com](http://www.kidsafetystore.com)).

Currently, more magazines are apt to print articles praising positive father involvement. More books are being written addressed specifically for fathers. More authors of parenting books address parents of *both* genders and include many photographs of fathers (not just of moms) of different ages and from different culture groups in loving interactions with infants and young children (Honig & Brophy, 1996).

Newspapers in today's world provide space for stories that praise positive fathering. US Senator Bill Bradley (1998) wrote a newspaper column entitled 'Being a good dad should be a man's top goal.' He began thus:

The most important thing a man can do in his life is to be a good father. All else pales—money, honor, celebrity. Fame and fortune pass. But with a child, you leave something of yourself behind. If you don't take this opportunity to do your best by your sons and daughters, you fail them and you fail your own humanity. (p. D3)

### **Men working in the world of childcare and elementary education**

The growing interest in men's roles as early childhood educators received a special boost during the May 2008 conference exclusively devoted to this topic in Honolulu. Sponsored by the World Forum Foundation and the Hawaii Association for the Education of Young children, this conference on Men in Early Childhood Education, included topics such as:

- Men in the lives of children, families, and society.
- Research on the impact of male involvement in ECE.
- Recruiting and training male teachers.
- Constraints to increasing male involvement and how to overcome them.
- Curriculum strategies with men in mind.

- Dealing with abuse fears and allegations.
- Realities of daily life for men in early childhood programs.

### Barriers to male involvement in childcare

There are many barriers to increased male involvement in childcare and nurturance, whether in enriching the paternal parenting role or in attempting to increase gender equality in childcare staffing (Cameron *et al.*, 2000).

Achieving gender balance through increasing men's roles in ECE settings has not and will not be an easy task! In Europe, the ECE Children's Network on Childcare prepared a lengthy report on male providers in childcare after interviews with providers, psychologists, parents, and psychiatrists in several countries. The Report emphasized: 'Childcare services remain one of the most gender segregated occupations in the entire labour force' (Jensen, 1995, p. 5). The figures they report for Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Spain, Belgium and the UK show that far more than 90% of childcare staff in the countries studied is female. Indeed, the Network reported that the debate on men in childcare in the UK, where over 98% of workers in 1981 were female, has led to restrictions on men, for example, not to put children on laps, and not to change a nappy without a female employee being present. The Network reports that such restrictions plus a focus on male sexuality, as if some male pedagogs must be gay, creates a work atmosphere of constant suspicion and discomfort for men.

The Network set out to study advantages and disadvantages of men working in childcare. As a positive example: children see a male staff member taking part in cooking and housekeeping scenarios with the children, and this helps challenge children's accepted stereotyped images of male roles.

The Report addressed obstacles to more men being employed. They suggested effective strategies to increase the number of men providing childcare. With respect to the latter goal, the Network described the 1988 decision of the Equal Rights Board in the municipality of Gothenburg, Sweden, to open a childcare center where the same number of men and women would be employed. After one year, men and women working at this center reported that staff was unusually 'free of conflicts.' Some of the men felt the wages were far too low; but this complaint is universal in the field for women as well as men in the USA too!

Women pedagogs in this study perceived that the men were much more accepted in childcare than women are usually accepted in male-dominated workplaces. They also felt appreciation of what they termed their specific female ways of doing things. Yet they also reported that they adopted what they termed a male way of talking to one another without feeling the subordination some women feel when talking with male bosses. Some of the male workers reported being overprotected by women who would do some caregiving chores for a male worker even when it was his turn.

Some children without fathers in the home hunger for male nurturance. Yet, male pedagogs in this study reported feeling uncomfortable when children of single mothers wanted to call them 'Daddy.' One center in the UK solved this problem by having the children call the male worker 'nursery daddy.'

One positive effect when staff included male workers was that *fathers were willing to spend more time at the center because there were male workers*. Since programs struggle in their attempts to involve fathers, increasing the number of male staff may be one positive approach to encourage more fathers of enrolled children to become active and involved in their children's center. Another positive effect was that girls, even though they usually chose different games from boys, were more likely, in a center with male teachers, to broaden the scope of their activities to include more spatial games.

The Report on the gender-equal center in Sweden soberly concluded that men would not stay on in caregiving jobs 'without demanding higher wages and advancement and would not show the subordination, patience, and loyalty that have been characteristic of women' (p. 12).

### *Cultural barriers*

Other countries and culture groups face an uphill battle to include more male workers due to *different cultural attitudes toward the work of ECE teachers*. When I visited a special school for training kindergarten teachers in China two decades ago, the young women were learning wonderful crafts, such as intricate paper cutting, and other skills to bring to the children in classrooms where they would be serving as teachers. I asked our male translator in puzzlement why there were no men in that institute. Puzzled as well, he promptly replied: 'Why would a man want to become a kindergarten teacher?' Writing in the Beijing Review more recently, Hui (1997) reported that he was told 'No, we don't have male teachers nor do other kindergartens in Beijing.' However, in 1996, he reported that 49 men in the Shanghai No. 2 Preschool Teachers' School graduated to become kindergarten teachers. They are teaching the children more physical games, such as skating, as well as photography and Go. One director remarked 'they bring more vitality to the kindergarten.' (p. 22). It will be fascinating to see whether in the future China promotes more gender equity in the field of early childhood education.

The Sheffield Children's Centre in England has had a policy of recruiting male workers since 1985 and actively sought to make known its gender principles, policies, and practices to the wider community by means of the literature circulated in 12 different languages, by public meetings and discussion, direct targeting of men's groups, radio discussions and training events (Meleady, 1998). Following its early successes in hiring, recruitment later proved difficult with particular cultures—Somali, Arabic, and Pakistani communities:

During meetings with male elders of the Somali community, the elders expressed the view that men caring for children was against the laws of nature and gave an example of how lions do not care for their young. Male staff from the Sheffield Centre responded to this with a description of Emperor Penguins. Following several meetings and awareness-raising sessions, a clear movement in perception became apparent and some Somali men were keen to pursue things ... [After] childcare training sessions and practical work experience, they became Centre workers—both unit and home-based. (p. 228)

*Barriers due to sexual anxieties and suspicions*

Williams (1993) interviewed men in traditionally female positions, such as teachers of the young or nurses. Some men felt they were in a dangerous position as single men working in elementary schools. They felt fearful about giving special attention to the children, particularly if a child was a female. A fourth-grade teacher said that because of possible misinterpretations, he would never give a child a hug!

The men sensed others' conflicting definitions of the male role itself: the disciplinarian surrogate father engaged in 'unfeminine' activities, or the feminine, nurturing, empathic companion of children. The men in this study were forced to steer a course between these two equally dangerous extremes, either of which could result in suspicion and ultimate dismissal ... The need for male role models in early childhood education presents a series of dilemmas for male teachers. Conforming too closely to traditional definitions of masculinity again raises doubts about men's competence as teachers, while emphasizing nurturance and sensitivity opens men to the charges of effeminacy, or even worse. (p. 126)

Some of the men encountered people who considered them 'sexually suspect if they are employed in these "feminine" occupations either because they do or they do not conform to stereotypical masculine characteristics' (Williams, 1995, p. 108). Male workers reported using several emotional and practical 'distancing' strategies, such as focusing on certain technical or prestigious elements of their job when talking with outsiders, or seeing their current job as laying the groundwork for future jobs that would be more prestigious, such as working in a high school rather than with young children in elementary school, or going further in their education in order to become an administrator. One man reflected: 'The more I think about it, I'm sure that's a large part of why I wound up in administration. It's okay for a man to do the administration' (p. 136). Williams considers moving toward administration rather than providing direct childcare as one way that men can 'distance' themselves from women and carve out a masculine niche for themselves.

Interest in how to resolve some of the above issues successfully has increased in the past decades. In England, in 1998, Owen *et al.* published the proceedings of a seminar held in Henley on Thames on men as workers in services for young children. In the USA, a national study of attitudes toward male workers in ECE settings was carried out with 1000 early childhood professional workers randomly selected from the membership of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Robinson *et al.*, 1984). Ninety percent of the sample of female and male teachers either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the item: 'Women are better suited by nature than men to work with preschool children.' Over 80% of teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the item: 'Many male preschool teachers tend to be effeminate.' Interestingly, 9.5% of male teachers agreed with this item.

No males but about 3% of female teachers agreed with the item: 'It is difficult to accept male preschool teachers because they are doing a woman's job.'

Almost one-fifth of male respondents and 13% of the women agreed with the item: 'Greater sensitivity and greater ability to nurture children tend to make women better suited than men for preschool teaching.' Most of the responses revealed similar views,

regardless of respondent gender, about the capability and role of male preschool teachers and a lack of polarity of attitudes between men and women. The problem of stereotyping and prejudice against male educators with young children certainly exists among some parents and providers, but these data are encouraging in indicating that such prejudices are far less prevalent among some workers affiliated with early childhood organizations than has been assumed.

### *Myths about men in early childcare*

Nelson (2004) has directly tackled some of the *myths* about why so few men work with young children and the stereotypes about men who do this work. One myth is that men won't work with young children because the wages are low. He points out that the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports men work in many low-paying jobs in the food industry, and in seasonal and temporary work. They are accepted in those settings and a critical point is that *other men are also working* in those settings. Thus it may be necessary to *hire a number of men in an ECE setting for other men to feel comfortable* in the job. Nelson points out that in the USA only 18.3% of elementary school teachers are men compared with 44.8% of secondary school teachers, yet union rules require that the salaries are the same!

Another *myth* is that men do not apply for ECE jobs. One survey in Ohio (Master-son, 1992) found that although Center directors hired women without degrees, they would not hire a man without an early childhood degree.

Another *myth* is that men who teach young children are gay. Male teachers are a diverse group. There are no data that provide evidence for the numbers of female or male childcare providers and ECE teachers who are straight, bisexual, or gay. Another *myth* is that men are more likely to leave the early childhood profession because of low wages. Women as well as men are likely to look for jobs that pay higher wages than childcare. Turnover rates in some facilities with only female teachers are over 40% annually in the USA.

Since childcare wages are low, men supporting families often face strong pressure to go into administration and move 'up' from the classroom, in order to earn increased wages. At the Children's Center in Syracuse, NY, one of the toddlers' most beloved teachers who created imaginative activities and had infinite patience with the children in his group, felt forced by economic necessity to leave our center and take a teaching position in elementary school (where salaries were higher) when his wife became pregnant with their third child.

### **Challenges and changes**

Despite brave predictions that the percentages of men caring for and teaching young children in Western countries would be substantially increased in twenty-first century schools and nurseries, there is still a struggle to achieve gender equity. Politically, nations do not set a high priority on encouraging more positive and intimately engaged fathering interactions in families. There is still a long road to travel toward



the goal of encouraging more men to participate in elementary classrooms and care centers with young children and to *stay* in the profession.

On a more promising note, more program descriptions are currently available that address the issue of how to recruit men for early childhood programs. Innovative strategies have been tried and provide a hopeful outlook. For example, Parents in Head Start's Community Action, in Minneapolis, redefined the role of the bus driver. They recruited their 54 Head Start bus drivers to become part of the ECE program and used this core of men to recruit other fathers. The drivers attend all educational staff meetings and also work one hour or more in the classroom (Levine *et al.*, 1993).

The rewards of those who choose to become early childhood care providers and teachers are eloquently expressed by McCartney (2007), a male teacher in the predominantly female world of early childhood. He reflected that:

To become a better teacher I had to listen to children, respect them as individuals, question what I was doing, change my practices, and learn to be understanding and compassionate in my interactions with them. I had to take charge of my own professional growth and seek opportunities to further my understanding of early childhood development. ... I recently ran into a former parent. ... Eight or nine years ago, when her child came into my 2nd grade class, he was emotionally needy, unsure of himself, never a risk-taker, and dealing with family problems ... I remember treating him with compassion, care, and understanding ... [His mother] took my breath away when she said he wouldn't be where he is now (a self-assured young man) without my help and thanked me for being there for her son when he needed a strong male role model. ... Some children need a male teacher, but all children need a teacher that cares deeply about them. (p. 4)

This teacher so eloquently expresses the rewards for men as *persons* as well as teachers when they engage in the nurture and education of young children. Hopefully, more men will find the deep satisfactions in personal growth in work with young children.

Hopefully, too, society will reflect on this all-important work and choose to recompense more fairly those men as well as women who choose to serve as teachers and nurturers engaged in schools and childcare centers in the admirable adventure of actively and sensitively working to help young children flourish as learners and as kind and caring persons.

### Notes on contributors

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